

## CHAPTER 8

### PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL COORDINATION

The condition of the lake and the status of SFWMD management efforts traditionally have been routinely reported to the public as part of the agency's ongoing public communication effort. The 1989 Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan established a specific public information goal to provide citizens with information concerning Lake Okeechobee water resource management issues and to implement an effective public awareness and participation project.

In addition, the SWIM Act requires the SFWMD to coordinate with other public agencies as part of the process of preparing, reviewing and approving the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan Update. The development of a Public Participation Program and an Intergovernmental Coordination Program will promote the involvement of the public and other agencies in the SWIM planning process.

This chapter presents goals, objectives and strategies to develop the public information and participation program that will inform South Floridians about Lake Okeechobee water resource issues and provide opportunities for the public to participate in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning process. The addition of a dedicated, organized approach for keeping local government staff members and elected officials up to date on Lake Okeechobee SWIM issues is hoped to lead to active local government involvement and enhanced public communication.

The following programs recommend methods for developing and disseminating information that describes the characteristics of the lake ecosystem, conveys a sense of the lake's environmental sensitivity and demonstrates Lake Okeechobee's prominence in the KOE ecosystem. These activities are designed to:

- Foster an awareness of Lake Okeechobee's role in meeting the needs of South Floridians for water supply and flood protection,
- Develop an understanding of human demands and impacts on Lake Okeechobee, and
- Enlist public support for Lake Okeechobee restoration and preservation efforts.
- Promote an understanding of and consistency with Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan goals in other related efforts such as the USACE Feasibility Studies.

The Public Participation and Intergovernmental Coordination programs are designed to:

- Advise the public, county, state and federal government agency staff, and elected officials of the nature and scope of Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning efforts, open the lines of communication between the public and agency planners, listen to the needs and the views of the public, and identify and respond to interested individuals, special interest groups, and agencies;

- Make available for agency and public review and comment all plans, reports, data analyses, interpretations, and other information for public inspection;

Facilitate interagency coordination in the development and implementation of action plans to achieve common water resource goals and objectives; and,

- Allow for facilitated public input into the planning process for future SWIM Plan Updates.

The following provides a summary of major challenge and strategy derived from the materials contained within this chapter.

**Challenge:** Create opportunities for public participation in the SWIM Plan Process.

**Strategy:** Enhanced environmental education efforts, teacher participation, facilitated discussions on problem solving without additional regulation and minimizing economic impacts, and to assist local governments with the incorporation of SWIM considerations into local comprehensive plans.

## A. GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Superscript denotes projects in Chapter 9.

**Goal 1:** Prepare and implement an effective public awareness program by disseminating information about Lake Okeechobee water resources and lake management issues to general audiences and students.

**Objective 1:** Develop and distribute materials that inform the general public about the features of the Lake Okeechobee ecosystem, including its physical, chemical and hydrologic features; water quality and sediment characteristics; tributary basins, biological resources; recreational resources; and the role of Lake Okeechobee in the KOE system.

**Strategy 1:** Within existing SFWMD education and public information projects, generate and distribute information to explain the lake's capacity to address flood

protection, water supply and environmental resource needs of South Florida, and more specifically, within the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning Area.<sup>29,30</sup>

**Strategy 2:** Prepare a three-year public communications plan, which will reflect major milestones in Lake Okeechobee research and the SWIM planning process.

The communications plan will focus on the actual issues and information that will be conveyed to various target audiences and will specify the appropriate communications vehicle(s).

**Goal 2:** Prepare and implement a project to encourage public participation in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning process by soliciting public input during the preparation, review and approval of SWIM Plan revisions and implementation of projects.

**Objective 1:** Create new opportunities for residents, scientists, business and commercial concerns, environmental groups, the regulated community, recreational users and other special interest groups to participate in the development of lake management strategies. Local populations and affected parties within the SWIM Planning Area will receive special emphasis.

**Strategy 1:** Develop a public participation and intergovernmental coordination process to support Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan development and implementation of lake management strategies.

**Strategy 2:** Establish a "Lake Watch" project, in which volunteers are solicited from the community to record observations of Lake Okeechobee and to provide water samples when needed. This will assist with research efforts and in establishing a historical record of changes in the Lake, as well as to foster community pride in the health of Lake Okeechobee and a better understanding of the lake.<sup>31,32</sup>

**Goal 3:** Prepare and implement an effective intergovernmental awareness and involvement program by encouraging intergovernmental participation in the Lake Okeechobee SWIM planning process during the preparation, review and approval of SWIM Plan revisions and implementation of projects; and coordinating regularly scheduled information workshops and meetings with county, state, and federal government staff members, as well as elected officials, for the purpose of information dissemination and public policy development.

**Objective 1:** Prepare a three-year intergovernmental involvement plan, that reflects major milestones in Lake Okeechobee research, supports Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan development, and the implementation of lake management strategies.

**Strategy 1:** Develop an intergovernmental participation and coordination process to focus on intergovernmental involvement through scheduling and pursuing an active outreach program to involve all local, state, and federal entities with interest in issues related to Lake Okeechobee.

**Strategy 2:** Establish communication with appropriate government staff and elected officials regarding the features of the Lake Okeechobee ecosystem.

**Objective 2:** Develop and coordinate workshops and meetings that inform appropriate government staff members and elected officials about the features of the Lake Okeechobee ecosystem, its physical, chemical and hydrologic features; water quality and sediment characteristics; tributary basins, biological resources; recreational resources; and the role of Lake Okeechobee in the KOE ecosystem.

**Strategy 1:** Develop and coordinate workshops and meetings that inform appropriate government staff members and elected officials regarding current and proposed research projects on Lake Okeechobee.

**Strategy 2:** Improve communication with local government staff members and elected officials about current and proposed policy regarding the Lake Okeechobee ecosystem by involving agency staff members in regular local meetings and workshops.

**Objective 3:** Create methods for appropriate local government staff members and elected officials to better participate in the interagency process that results in public policy regarding the operation and management of Lake Okeechobee, and to link Lake Okeechobee SWIM projects with other interagency efforts.<sup>33</sup>

**Strategy 1:** Use the Okeechobee Service Center as a clearinghouse for all lower Kissimmee Basin/Lake Okeechobee projects, staff members can better coordinate all system-related projects.

**Strategy 2:** Use the Okeechobee Service Center as a resource/facilitator, interagency and multi-governmental projects can be housed and/or coordinated locally.

## B. REVIEW OF CURRENT PROJECTS

**Lake Okeechobee--Closer Look:** An eight-page edition in the SFWMD's "Closer Look" series was published in March, 1995 and updated in July, 1997. The document explores Lake Okeechobee, discussing its past, present and future in the context of man's impacts on the Lake. The Lake Okeechobee: Closer Look was designed to also accompany an informational natural-history seminar on the Lake titled "From Algae to Alligators: The Nature of Lake Okeechobee" in 1995 and will be issued as a companion publication with the 1997 update of the Lake Okeechobee

SWIM Plan. An additional companion publication will be mailed with the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Update in 1997, which is a historical look at Lake Okeechobee and includes many vibrant descriptions of what the big lake once was like.

**Seminar “From Algae to Alligators: The Nature of Lake Okeechobee”:**

This natural-history seminar on Lake Okeechobee was first presented in Okeechobee and Belle Glade in the Spring of 1995. The very basic seminar is designed to explain man's impact on Lake Okeechobee by highlighting the changes in the plants and animals making their home in the Lake. The seminar consists of a 45-minute lecture followed by a one-hour question and answer session with a panel of Lake Okeechobee experts assembled from the Department of Environmental Protection, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, as well as SFWMD staff. It will be developed into a 30-minute video that can be widely distributed to schools, public libraries and to the general public as an informational tool about Lake Okeechobee. Future plans are to present the seminar each winter, and to expand on the information base as the public expresses a desire to delve deeper into Lake Okeechobee issues.

**Education Campaign:** SFWMD staff have continued to encourage and assist with the use of a SFWMD-developed secondary school curriculum, “How Much, How Good: The Story of South Florida's Water.” The project highlights Lake Okeechobee and serves as a major educational campaign about the lake. More than 50,000 student books, several hundred teacher guides and “Hurricanes to High Tech” videos have been distributed within the 16-county area.

Additionally, SFWMD staff in the Okeechobee Service Center have assisted the Okeechobee High School (OHS) ecology class since 1993 in establishing a water quality monitoring network at the OHS agricultural property. The program teaches the students how to collect water quality samples as well as how the SWIM Plan affects local landowners. The program has been expanded to include OHS agriculture classes. Using a grant obtained from the FDEP and additional support from the SFWMD, Okeechobee Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the High School Agriculture Department, the classes will conduct a demonstration project showing improved grazing techniques lead to better water quality runoff. The project will utilize BMP's including fencing, solar powered livestock water troughs, rotational grazing, and matching fertilizer application rates with plant needs for growth. This is a two-year project that will begin in the 1997-1998 school year. Students will monitor water quality, conduct soil tests, and analyze forage samples. The animals' weight gain will be tracked to determine the overall efficiency of the system. The project products will include a field day for the students to show parents, teachers, and the public the benefits of improved grazing techniques and a final project report providing a comparative analysis of the improved grazing techniques and water quality.

Also beginning in the 1997-98 school year, all third and sixth grade students in Okeechobee County will have an opportunity to join a natural history tour of Lake

Okeechobee's Audubon Sanctuary as part of the school's use of SFWMD curriculum for those grade levels. Students will have an opportunity to see the lake while learning how man has impacted Lake Okeechobee and about efforts to restore the lake. The Okeechobee High School Ecology Class will have a more detailed Lake tour, coupled with enhanced water quality training and a visit to the Riverwoods Field Laboratory in Highlands County to learn about invertebrate studies. The Okeechobee County School Board hopes to make this an annual learning experience for its students by obtaining funding through various grants.

Palm Beach County science teachers joined an advanced teacher training workshop on Lake Okeechobee water quality and invertebrate issues in the summer of 1997, which was a joint activity between the Center for Environmental Studies and the SFWMD. During the intensive two-day workshop, approximately 20 biology and chemistry teachers toured Lake Okeechobee by airboat, visited a dairy farm to learn about Best Management Practices, learned water quality sampling techniques, sampled invertebrates at the Riverwoods Field Laboratory and received training on water quality and invertebrate changes due to man's impact on the Lake Okeechobee and Kissimmee River ecosystems.

A special comprehensive teacher training project providing 600 educators with information concerning the KOE ecosystem was completed in 1992. Ongoing teacher education efforts, such as SFWMD participation in teacher workshops, also serve the same function. Future teacher workshops will include field trips on Lake Okeechobee to view aquatic weed control efforts, water sampling stations, invertebrate sampling and to perform hands-on experiments on the lake; as well as site visits and lectures on area agriculture and Best Management Practices. These workshops are designed to foster a greater awareness of the complexities of Lake Okeechobee management, as well as to instill a greater appreciation of the many benefits Lake Okeechobee has to offer.

On the primary school level, students are routinely taught the value of water quality and conservation as it applies to Lake Okeechobee. Regular visits from SFWMD mascot "Freddy the Alligator" help to reinforce to young students the need to protect the environment.

**Media Coordination.** A greater effort has been made to educate print and broadcast media about the complexities of Lake Okeechobee management efforts. Media coordination on lake issues, including the status of the Best Management Practices and Works of the District programs and the Aquatic Plant Management program on Lake Okeechobee, as well as aerial and ground tours of the lake, are part of the ongoing communications initiatives for Lake Okeechobee. As several five-year studies on Lake Okeechobee and the watershed were completed and results presented to the Governing Board in 1994, media contacts were actively sought to disseminate the information to the general public. This was accomplished through the use of press releases which were widely distributed throughout the 16-county area.

Future plans also include creation of a weekly newspaper column that can be used to address Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan issues, as well as many other issues of the SFWMD and a newsletter with information similar to the newspaper column, but in different format for those readers who do not take a newspaper. These efforts will invite readers to write in with questions about the SFWMD including rules, regulations, plans and policies.

**The Everglades Connection.** Following its premier issue in May 1992 which previewed the update of the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan, this quarterly newsletter regularly focused on resource management issues associated with the Kissimmee-Everglades-Okeechobee systems. The newsletter was discontinued in early 1997.

**Publicizing the SFWMD's Aquatic Weed Control Efforts.** The SFWMD's Operations and Maintenance Department holds annual public meetings on weed control efforts. In addition, maps which depict areas to be sprayed are distributed to fish camps and are posted at public boat ramps every two weeks. This information also is featured in the newspaper column and newsletter.

**"Lake Okeechobee: Fighting for its Life."** The SFWMD ordered 50,000 copies of the Palm Beach Post article (March 12, 1989), "Lake Okeechobee: Fighting for its Life," and is continuing distribution to schools and the general public.

**Proposed Public and Intergovernmental Coordination Communication Plan:** The communications plan will include, but may not be limited to, a series of articles summarizing SFWMD research efforts and publications covering efforts undertaken since 1989, including SWIM and non-SWIM activities. The project will explain how SFWMD research projects define and measure the extent of resource problems and contribute toward the development of management strategies. The project will develop a reporting mechanism that tracks the progress of the regulatory programs in reducing the phosphorus loading to the lake, as well as the status of the FDEP Dairy Rule, current Best Management Practices, and the Works of the District Rule.

Special emphasis will be given to reporting to the public the status of SWIM planning efforts. Program activities will be planned to communicate the effectiveness of efforts to date, including discussions of current progress, definitions of problems, results achieved to date and an indication of whether objectives have been met. If management projects will not be proceeding as planned, efforts will be made to explain why management projects are being discontinued, deferred or redirected. Program updates will also describe SFWMD efforts to coordinate SWIM planning activities with other agencies that share similar resource goals and objectives. Program updates will also provide information concerning funding sources and project budgets. Preparation of the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Communications Plan is proposed to begin in 1997-98.

**Proposed Intergovernmental and Public Participation Project:** The intergovernmental and public participation project will generate methods to advise the public and elected officials of the nature and scope of the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Planning efforts, open the lines of communication between the public and agency planners, listen to the needs and the views of the public and identify and respond to interested individuals, special interest groups and other agencies. Facilitated discussions on SWIM Plan development will be held utilizing representatives from a wide variety of interests. Results of the facilitated discussions will be considered during development of future SWIM Plan Updates.

The participation project will identify key research efforts for public review and assessment and prepare to report the results of those research efforts as early as possible. Issue papers may be prepared to inform target audiences and to frame discussions with agency planners. Methods of soliciting technical review and comment will be created and implemented. The project will be prepared to communicate the revised status of research efforts and subsequent impacts on the SWIM planning process.

The project will create avenues for the public to review the status and address the effectiveness of SWIM resource management efforts. Communities, special interest groups, and others affected by resource management projects will be identified and the role of external parties in the development of management goals, objectives, and strategies will be defined. The project will provide for the development of a process to communicate with and solicit input from these targeted groups on the impact of lake management strategies. Subsequent revisions to management goals and objectives will be documented.

The project will provide opportunities for other public agencies to participate in the development and implementation of management projects. Potential activities include, but are not limited to: Participation in issue-specific task forces or advisory groups; local meetings or workshops; co-sponsorship of studies to evaluate management alternatives; contribution of funding or in-kind services for demonstration projects; and cost sharing the implementation of management projects. Development of the Lake Okeechobee SWIM Plan Public Participation Project is proposed to begin in 1997-98.

**Proposed "Lake Watch" Project:** The Lake Watch Project will be comprised of volunteers from all communities and walks of life around Lake Okeechobee. Volunteers will be trained to take and analyze water quality samples from Lake Okeechobee and to establish a historical record of their findings. This is a long-term project designed to help create a large historical database of information about the Lake, to foster an awareness of the effects of changes in water quality on Lake Okeechobee and to create a sense of pride and participation in efforts to revitalize the Lake. Development of the "Lake Watch" project is set to begin in 1998.